



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

THE COAT THAT LIT A BARBECUE

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We're going to be talking about a barbecue today, and that makes me think of picnics. Isn't it a great day for a church picnic? The sun is shining, but not TOO hot, the park is close by, the food is thoroughly cooked...I have fond memories of church picnics as a kid. Not the food so much as a big pile of sawdust. I'm not sure who came up with the idea, but our church always had a big pile of sawdust at the picnic, and someone would bury pennies in it. Then us kids would get to hunt for them. I could always count on coming home with at least seven cents and wood chips in my pants. Those were the days. New Day kids don't know what they're missing. Oh well. It should still be a great picnic.

As we saw last week, though, being a prophet was no picnic for Elijah (see the natural segue?). He suffered some serious discouragement last week. Not only was he ready to end his career as a prophet – he was ready to end his life under that broom tree. But God wasn't finished with Elijah. He gave him a bigger vision and a new mission to carry out.

Here's what God told Elijah to do:

1 Kings 19:15-17

The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet.

If you've ever left a job, you know how strange it feels to prepare for your successor. My dad is getting ready to retire in another 7 or 8 weeks from being a pastor for over 20 years. He's not directly involved in picking his replacement, but he's watching as the church decides what it wants in their next pastor. His thoughts turn to what's been done during his time. Will it last? Will the next person take a whole new direction or continue what he started?

Prior to God's instruction, Elijah seems to have not given a whole lot of thought to the next guy. He was ready to call it quits before finding anyone. His focus had been on the work in front of him – the confrontations with King Ahab, the miracles, etc. He wasn't concerned with what would happen when his work stopped.

But God apparently was. So he makes mentoring the mission. It becomes one of Elijah's primary jobs to call Elisha and pour his knowledge and experience into him. Elijah has to rethink his own calling. It isn't enough for him to just anoint the next kings – he needs to anoint his own successor. God wants to ensure that there will be an ongoing voice and witness in front of those kings, someone who will stand – stand up, stand in, stand against, stand out, stand for God and say, “This is what the Lord says.”

Do you ever think about why you are a Christian? I don't mean your reasons why you BECAME a Christian. I mean, why does God have you here? What is your calling? If we're ready for heaven as soon as we put our faith in Jesus, why doesn't God just take us home the minute we make that decision?

I think at least part of the answer to that question is that God is wanting to maintain a witness in the world until the end.

2 Peter 3:9

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

God has an agenda that's bigger than us. And just like he wanted Elijah to appoint Elisha, he wants us to be future minded as well, pouring ourselves into the people who will carry on God's work after we're gone.

In a soccer game, when it comes time to do a throw in, it's really important to make sure your feet are planted correctly, because the throw will be disqualified if you lift one of your feet. That's always a big challenge for beginning soccer players to remember. Both feet have to be firmly on the ground.

But you also have to throw in the ball. You can't just work on your stance and be done with it. You've got to snap the ball in quickly so that the game can continue and your team can score.

Elijah had been focused on his stance. He was paying attention to planting his feet and not budging. He was a wall for God against the evil of Ahab. He had that down really well. But he wasn't thinking about releasing the ball to another player. That's what needed to happen for God's work to continue.

If we think about our own calling, it has two parts to its nature as well. The first is to stand firm for God. My sister was in the play, “12 Angry Men.” They changed it to be “12 Angry Jurors.” But the play is about a murder trial, and when the jury first goes into their deliberations, everybody's tired of the trial and ready to go home. Eleven of the jurors were ready to cast a guilty vote. But my sister's character resisted and wanted to think through the evidence. You can feel the tension and the pressure as one person takes on a roomful of people who just want to make a decision and don't really care if it's the right one.

That's a picture of the Christian life. We are called to live well for God, standing up for what's right in the face of constant opposition and pressure to do something else. That's part of being salt and light.

But there's more to our work than that. We're also called to throw the ball forward, to help raise up the next generation of Elijahs and Elishas who will speak truth to power long after we are gone.

New studies show that an alarming number of kids who grow up in Christian homes completely walk away from their faith when they hit college. Their peers become the major influence on all their decisions. As the church, we have the responsibility to give them the tools they need to keep their faith intact in that kind of environment. It's not that we shield them from the world – it's that we better prepare them to grapple with it. Are we doing all we can to invest in a new generation who have the strength to stand up and say, "This is what the Lord says" when their friends say otherwise?

God is looking for future Elishas who by their words and lives become a testimony to God as an alternative, people whose very existence is counter-cultural, people who think and act according to different rules.

God impressed on Elijah not just the need to keep living for him, but also to throw his ministry forward. That is the ongoing challenge of the church – to propel God's witness into the future.

That's just what Elijah did.

1 Kings 19:19-21

So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair.

It appears that Elijah had never met Elisha before. God gives Elijah a description of who he is and where to find him. This was clearly God's choice and not Elijah's. And it's a surprising choice.

There was a whole school of prophets who were most likely disciples of Elijah. They were known to have some skills in speaking prophecies. It would have made a lot of sense to choose one of them -- somebody who had been preparing for this kind of role. Instead, God tells Elijah to go look for this farm boy he didn't know, who had no formal background in this sort of thing.

Remember all the news coverage when they chose the new Pope? All the cardinals got together in Rome and selected one of their group to be next? What if the old Pope had said, "No – there's a guy in Nebraska who's just right for the job. He drives a tractor for his dad on a wheat farm in the heartland, but go ask him, because I think he'll be perfect."

It's just not done that way. If I were Elijah, I think I might have been a little bit insulted by the choice of Elisha. God thinks a completely unqualified, untrained hick from the sticks can replace me. Great. It's one thing to pass the torch to a brilliant young up and comer who just graduated from an Ivy League school, but this guy's a nobody who hasn't even applied for the job.

Kinda makes you think, doesn't it? Our usability to God doesn't come from any special gifts or talents we possess. He didn't choose us because we've got so much to offer. He just chooses us because he wants to. And he's usually able to shine the best through the least likely candidates.

So we're misguided if we begin to think, "Wow. I'm a pretty good catch for God." But we're also misguided if we think, "I'm so worthless God could never use me." He makes the useless useful, the ugly beautiful and the powerless a powerful demonstration of what he can do.

Elisha was a much different person than Elijah. Elijah was a hermit used to living alone for long periods, while Elisha had a large social circle. Twelve teams of oxen implies that Elisha's family had some money, which would be a pretty stark contrast with the man who lived in caves and wore a camel's hair coat.

Elisha was middle management. He was a supervisor of the other field workers, but he was also a worker himself. He wasn't above getting his hands dirty. You get the impression that here was a guy who was good at what he did and who knew how to get a job done. But he's not the flashy dramatic type you'd expect God to choose.

Again, backgrounds and personality differences don't matter to God. Elijah may have seemed like the perfect personality profile for a prophet, but God shows that there is no one type that works for him.

Whatever his personal thoughts may have been, Elijah didn't hesitate to do what God asked.

Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him.

Imagine what it must have been like to be Elisha. You're out in the field, focused on trying to keep your oxen plowing straight, shouting instructions to the other workers. You're hot and sweaty, concentrating on your job, when all of a sudden this strange man walks up and puts his coat around your shoulders. The coat was probably all hairy, because that seems to be what the prophets wore. Heavy. Uncomfortable. Interfering with your work.

We have no recorded words from Elijah. For all we know, he did this act in silence and then left. It doesn't seem like he was waiting for any response from Elisha. He just kept walking. But the significance of the act wasn't lost on Elisha. He knew that when that

garment was placed on his shoulders it meant something. This was a calling. The cloak meant at least three things:

1. It meant someone new had a claim on his life.

Elisha recognized that there would be a new authority in his life. Instead of answering to his parents, he would now answer to Elijah. Elijah was putting a claim on him.

2. It meant the course of his life was about to change forever.

Farming as usual was over. That simple event of being “tagged” with the coat turned his world upside down and it would never go back to being the way it had been before. He had a new direction.

3. It meant that power and responsibility were being transferred to him.

Elijah’s awesome connection to the power of God was symbolized by that jacket. When it was placed on Elisha, it represented a transfer of power. What Elijah had been able to do, Elisha would now be able to do.

The coat represented all of those things when Elijah placed it on Elisha’s shoulders. We look at Elisha and think, “That’s nice. He had a special calling. God singled him out and he was the rare exception. Not everybody’s an Elisha.”

That would be more comfortable to think, because then his story wouldn’t apply so much to ours. We could take it or leave it.

But if we consider ourselves Christians, we HAVE also received a calling. What does it mean that we have a calling? Like that coat, a calling can be heavy, uncomfortable and interfering with what we want to do. It means the same things for us that it did for Elisha:

1. Someone new has a claim on our lives.

Romans 1:6

And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

Part of our calling is a call to give up our independence. We’re called to belong to Jesus. Instead of the pressures and forces that naturally put a claim on our lives, we’re called to live like we have a stronger allegiance. Paul puts it in no uncertain terms when he writes to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 6:9&10

You are not your own. You were bought at a price.

That claim will mean a difference in the choices we make.

2. The course of our lives has changed forever.

Once we've made the decision to follow Christ, it's a decision to leave the farm, whatever the farm may be. We can't go on the same way as before.

That doesn't mean we're all called to leave our jobs or our homes -- we're just called to view them differently. R.G. LeTourneau was a brilliant inventor and who developed some of the largest earth moving equipment of our time – massive machines that have been used all over the world. In the early years of his career, he was a Christian, but that fact didn't have much impact on his life. One day his sister asked him, "What's the matter with you Bob? Don't you love our Savior?"

He was shocked. Of course he did. He went to church every week and helped out with mission projects. So he asked her what she meant. She said, "I know you have a list of good deeds, and every week you check them off and say 'Now that that's over I can get back to work.' Bob that's not loving Jesus. When you love him you'll want to serve him, and you'll hunt for ways to do it."

So Bob went to a revival at his church and he prayed, telling God he'd do whatever he wanted. But he couldn't see how God could use him. He knew he couldn't preach and he didn't feel like he was supposed to be a missionary somewhere. So he met with his pastor and told him what he had prayed. And his pastor said, "You know Bob, God needs businessmen as much as he needs preachers and missionaries."

Something clicked when his pastor said that. And from that point on, he decided to partner with God on his job. Even though his circumstances stayed the same, everything changed because he had given it all to God. He took his mechanical mind and decided to build the best and biggest machines he could. Then he took that technology to poorer countries like Liberia and Peru to help them begin to feed themselves. He made millions and gave millions to God's work – all the while still being himself.

When we know we've been called, it changes the course of our lives.

3. Power and responsibility have been transferred to us.

We have the power to change and not stay where we were. Jesus used the imagery of Elijah's cloak when he told his disciples in Luke that they would be clothed with power from on high in the form of the Holy Spirit. Each person who trusts in Jesus is wrapped in the Holy Spirit the way Elijah wrapped his coat around Elisha. The power of Jesus himself is transferred to us. Jesus went so far as to say this:

John 14:12

The person who trusts me will not only do what I'm doing but even greater things...

He's talking about ordinary people who trust in him, people like you and me. It's not the exception – it's the rule. We all have been given life changing power. And as we all know from Spiderman, with great power comes great responsibility. If we have the Holy

Spirit, we have a charge to let the Holy Spirit do his work in us. Letting that power flow is part of our calling.

I think we completely underestimate what the Holy Spirit can do in us and through us. Most of the time, I function as if God's power isn't really available to me. But he's the very same spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. He IS the fire from heaven. He can still conquer fears. He can still melt hard hearts. He can still save marriages. He can still strengthen the weary. He can still heal what's been broken. And he can still make me more Christlike.

We have a new power when we're clothed with the Holy Spirit. We are different people, infused with more strength and ability than is humanly possible.

All these realizations hit Elisha as Elijah draped that cloak around his shoulders. Then just as quickly as it happened it was over. Elijah begins to walk away. Maybe he thought there would be a waiting period before that calling would take effect, like the way there was sometimes a gap between when a king was anointed and when they actually took the throne. Maybe he was just leaving the results in God's hands. In any case, here's what happened next:

Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah.

Isn't that amazing? No hesitation at all on Elisha's part – he ran after Elijah. He pursued his calling. He didn't wait for clarification to come to him: he sought it out.

What's our response when we begin to feel God is directing us to do something? Do we wait for him to explain himself? Or do we take it upon ourselves to pursue the answers, to run after him and learn more? I want more of the heart of Elisha, willing to leave the comfort and security of what I know and pursue God's call on me wholeheartedly. We are to run after God.

Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. "Let me kiss my father and mother good-bye," he said, "and then I will come with you."

"Go back," Elijah replied. "What have I done to you?"

So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate.

It's barbecue time. Elisha is giving up his past. He's putting his old life behind him and getting ready for the next thing.

But I like it that he didn't just walk away. He turned his old life into a gift. He took what he had been, cooked it up and made a meal that he was able to share with his friends and family. Everybody celebrated his new calling with him and at the same time benefited from his former life in the form of a barbecue.

Many people come to God from a painful past and are more than ready to distance themselves from where they've been. Some memories we don't want to keep. But sometimes we have the opportunity to do more than just walk away from our past – we can turn it into a barbecue, a gift that feeds other people.

2 Corinthians 1:4

He comes alongside us when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings us alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person just as God was there for us.

It takes a great deal of courage to open up and share your history with someone, especially if it's a history you're not exactly proud of. But God brought you through it for a reason, and it isn't just to say you are over it. It's so you can feed other people and let them celebrate with you how God has called you to something new.

Elisha served up the barbecue, washed up the dishes,

Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant.

He didn't immediately take over for Elijah. He became his assistant. What does one do when one is assistant to the prophet? We get a small glimpse of that from 2 Kings, when King Jehoshaphat was trying to locate a prophet.

2 Kings 3:11

But Jehoshaphat asked, "Is there no prophet of the LORD here, that we may inquire of the LORD through him?"

An officer of the king of Israel answered, "Elisha son of Shaphat is here. He used to pour water on the hands of Elijah."

There you have it. Elisha was like one of those attendants in fancy hotel bathrooms that stands there with the towel when you wash your hands. He was Elijah's kitchen sink. He was doing menial labor.

This was God's big call on his life? He gave up his lucrative career as a foreman on the family farm to help Elijah wash his hands? There's zero prestige in that calling. At times that must have felt demeaning, particularly given the fact that Elijah would have been a bit surly of an employer.

The surprise of God's call is that when God calls us, it is a call to service. The whole idea of a calling sounds like it would be to something important and that there would be a lot of recognition when we follow it. We want to do a big, impressive job for God. But his calling isn't about honoring us. As Jesus said, the Son of Man came to serve, not to be served. We're just following in his steps.

That may sound like a disappointment, but it can also be a relief. The small acts of service and kindness that you and I do are important. If washing someone's hands can be part of God's calling, then so can doing laundry and changing the oil in a car or giving someone a ride. I don't need to live under this vague sense that I'm only really following God if I'm doing something impressive. God's big assignment for us may be much smaller than we thought.

We're called to serve others and we're called to grow, and usually we grow the most in times that are stretching and times we don't feel like we know what we're doing.

So while it seems like it could be a source of pride, a calling is a giant dose of humility – learning that it's not about us. Once we learn that, God can and will do awesome things through us because of his power and not our own.

As you think about your own calling:

1. Am I releasing the ball? Am I thinking about how to throw my faith forward, in the lives of my kids or others around me? How am I going to invest in a future witness?

2. Am I pursuing my call? Am I running after God, asking him to make something of my life?

3. What can I throw on the barbecue? What of my past can I use to help other people who may not yet know there's hope?

4. Am I willing to be a kitchen sink? Will I be teachable and serve in whatever capacity God has for me?

God has claimed you and me for himself, clothing us in his Spirit, filling us with his power. This is what the Lord says: I am still God, and I'm calling a people to myself, a people who will stand in the gap, a people who will not bend the knee to culture but who will speak the truth and live a life of love so compelling that generations to come will know who I am.

That's the call. What will we do with it?